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SIPDIS
C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (GENEVA ADDED)

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR HARRIMAN
OSD FOR SHIVERS
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-76 POLAD
GENEVA FOR PRM M. STORELLA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: UPDATE ON AFGHAN REFUGEES, DEPORTEES, AND SQUATTERS

REF: A. KABUL 1594
[1](#)B. KABUL 1605

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Summary

[1](#)1. Recent developments relating to three distinct segments of the wave of Afghan "returnees" - refugees from Pakistan, deported irregular migrants from Iran, and Kuchi squatters near Pol-i-Charki - have renewed focus on refugee/displaced persons issues. Over 200,000 refugees have returned from Pakistan in 2007, with over half returning to Nangarhar. Approximately 62,000 Afghans have been deported from Iran. International Organization on Migration (IOM) reports that the government and local communities are providing adequate support for those passing through the transit centers near the Iranian border, but also expresses concern regarding the implications of the significant number of single men returning to Nimruz and Farah provinces. Finally, 350 Kuchi families are squatting in the Kabul area, claiming right to the land. President Karzai has asked Second Vice President Khalili to lead GoA efforts to address the issues relating to the returnees from Iran and Pakistan. In a May 24th meeting convened by Karzai, Khalili highlighted the importance of providing returnees with reintegration assistance. The Ambassador highlighted the significant U.S. assistance already being provided and welcomed UNAMA's announcement of a special appeal for assistance to deal with the recent wave of returns. Other donors also expressed support. End Summary.

Background

¶2. Approximately 5 million Afghans have voluntarily returned since 2002, contributing to the explosive population growth of Kabul and other cities. A comparable number still reside in Iran and Pakistan. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are as many as one million irregular Afghan migrants and 920,000 registered refugees in Iran. There are an estimated 2.6 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 2.1 million of whom are registered. Most will return to their own houses or stay with family or friends (Nangarhar, Farah, Nimruz, Herat, Ghazni, and Kandahar have seen the most population growth due to recent returnees), although some will end up moving on to Kabul or other cities seeking job opportunities and a relatively stable security situation.

Refugee Repatriation

¶3. Both Iran and Pakistan have signed separate trilateral agreements on refugees with Afghanistan and UNHCR. These agreements, which apply to registered refugees, aim to return refugees in a gradual and dignified manner, taking into account the absorptive capacity of GoA. In February, the Pak-Afghan-UNHCR Trilateral Commission decided to close four refugee camps in Pakistan, two in NWFP and two in Baluchistan. Two camps are to be closed by June 15, the second set by August 31. We support the program as part of a larger strategy to remove targets of opportunity for Taliban recruitment and source of contention between Kabul and Islamabad. The refugees have the option of returning to Afghanistan or relocating to other camps (in northern NWFP, inaccessible in the winter). 80%

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of registered refugees in Pakistan (many of whom have been there for decades) express reluctance to return to Afghanistan due to insecurity, lack of employment, and relative lack of comparable social services, including health care and education.

¶4. UNHCR's 2007 voluntary repatriation program is being conducted in two phases. The first phase, from March 1 to April 15, gave undocumented Afghans the opportunity to leave Pakistan with UNHCR assistance. 206,112 took advantage of the offer, many motivated by the threat of arrest, detention, and deportation. (Note: There are some indications that many of these "returnees" are not genuine refugees but regular border-crossers eager to take advantage of a generous UNHCR repatriation package. The 2007 UNHCR repatriation package is \$100 per returnee verses an average of \$23 per returnee in 2006. On average, 25,000 cross the border daily, often without documentation. End Note.) 78% of these returnees went to eastern provinces; 145,933 returned to Nangarhar. The second phase for registered refugees began on April 19 and will run through November. 10,000 have returned thus far, but the rate is expected to increase. Much will depend upon the evolving security situation in the southern and southeastern provinces.

Deportees from Iran: Just the Opening Salvo?

¶5. Following Teheran's announcement on January 21 that it intended to "regularize" illegal Afghans living in Iran -- and unproductive negotiations with the GOA,

Iran's Disciplinary and Special Forces began forcibly removing Afghans on April 21. An estimated 62,108 Afghans have been forcibly deported. IOM and UNHCR stress that, with very few exceptions, these returnees are not refugees, but irregular migrants, some who have been living in Iran for years. Returnees are transiting through two primary border crossings - Zaranj in Nimruz (37,778 crossed, mostly families) and Islam Qala in Herat (24,330 crossed, mostly single males). In Nimruz, returnees are directed toward a transit center, where twenty tents, drinking water, food, and medical care are available. IOM reports that the conditions in the centers are adequate, due to support from ministries, local communities, and the Red Crescent Society. The deportees can stay in the center for up to 48 hours and then will return to their home provinces, most via private truck. The majority of deportees are from Farah, which has received at least 1,674 families, with the remainder from Nimruz and Herat. IOM notes it is clear that these very poor provinces do not have the capacity to absorb the deportees and provide even minimal services. There is deep concern about the significant number of unemployed and likely disaffected young men being returned to this border region. The problem will intensify if Iran continues to oust irregular migrants and repatriate one million Afghans by March 2008, which is its stated goal. Voluntary repatriations from Iran have been very low (1,262 since March).

Kuchi Squatters in Kabul: Setting a Dangerous Precedent?

16. According to a MoRR and UNHCR assessment team (corroborated by a CSTC-A/MoD team), around 350 Kuchi families of the Ahmad Zai tribe returned from Pakistan on April 27 and settled in the Butkhak area, near Pol-

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i-Charki. Their representative, Haji Munjai, who is well-connected to a number of GoA ministers (including General Wardak, which may explain MoD involvement) and who has been based in this area for nearly two years, reportedly received assurances from former Minister Akbar that MoRR would provide them with water if they returned. The tribe then moved to the Butkhak area of Kabul, claiming right to the land (they have no documentation). (Comment: Land use disputes between Afghan communities and the traditionally nomadic Kuchi are not infrequent. End Comment.) MoRR has been providing two or three tankers of water to the refugees each day, but hesitated in providing other assistance, concerned about establishing a permanent illegal camp and encouraging similar squatting. On May 21, Minister Wardak nevertheless directed delivery of tents, blankets, and additional water; it is unclear whether he consulted MoRR or POA. Other reports, which UNHCR and MoRR deny, have suggested that seven refugees have died. The UN has unofficially adopted a "steer clear" attitude, citing political sensitivities of supporting one ethnic group's claim to a particular area. The group there now says it intends to stay, and the number of Kuchi and other refugees could easily grow to 10-20,000 persons this summer. UNAMA is convening a meeting of interested parties with the National Emergency Commission on May 27 and a meeting with the Governor of Kabul on Monday, May 28 to discuss the status of these families.

Reintegration and Funding

¶7. A main element of MoRR's reintegration effort for returnees (focusing on those from Pakistan) has been a nation-wide land distribution plan for returnees, which has been hampered by limited infrastructure and resources. UNHCR and donor nations, including the U.S. (through PRM), established a pilot project focused on five provinces (Nangarhar, Herat, Logar, Baghlan, and Ghazni) to improve land distribution sites and basic infrastructure. In Nangarhar, there is one land distribution site for the province, which is located 35 km outside of Jalalabad. There are 8,000 plots of land, but more than 40,000 have applied for these limited resources. Approximately 1,000 families are living at the distribution center; shelter and water are being provided by donor nations, including the U.S.

¶8. Anticipating emerging refugee/IDP needs, Congress allocated supplemental funding of \$16 million in Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) funds and an estimated \$18 million from the International Disaster and Famine Assistance (IDFA) for Afghanistan. These funds may be used for shelter, fuel, and other necessities, including water and sanitation, health care, roads, livelihoods, education and training, and capacity building within the ministries charged with reintegration and relevant development. Funds will be used "in and around Kabul," where many IDPs may eventually settle, as well as other provinces such as Nangarhar and Kandahar, where many returnees are expected to go initially. These funds have some degree of inherent flexibility so that assistance can be tailored to the changing needs on the ground as the situation evolves. A 3-person IFDA team will arrive in Kabul in early June to work with the GOA, UNHCR, donors, and NGOs to develop a strategy to meet the needs of returnees and IDPs in the short, medium, and long-term.

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President Karzai Calls Refugee Meeting

¶9. President Karzai convened the diplomatic corps on May 24 to announce the GOA's determination to address the problem of the large number of Afghans returning from Pakistan (mostly as refugees) and Iran (mostly as deported illegal workers) and underline Afghanistan's urgent need for support. The President said he had asked Second Vice President Khalili to lead the GOA's efforts. Minister of Refugee Affairs Akbar (who remains in office despite parliament's no-confidence vote against him) spoke briefly. Khalili, who led most of the discussion, claimed that Afghanistan's "enemies" were trying to use refugees and deportations to create instability and political difficulties for the GOA. He underlined the importance of providing the support necessary to allow the returnees to reintegrate. Priorities must be shelter and employment.

¶10. Karzai told the ambassadors that he had sent a letter to President Ahmadinejad asking for a pause in the deportations from Iran. In the meantime, an Afghan delegation was traveling to Teheran in an attempt to reach agreement on a more coordinated program for the return of the irregular Afghans that Iran is determined to return.

¶11. Deputy SRSR Chris Alexander provided a summary of UNHCR IOM, and WFP efforts to provide assistance particularly to the Afghans being deported from Iran. Alexander emphasized that the Trilateral (GOA, GOI,

UNHCR) mechanism was not an adequate mechanism for dealing with the problem of the deported irregular Afghans, as this population is not covered by the agreement. He described Iran's actions as not meeting acceptable humanitarian standards, and commented that the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission might be able to play a role. Alexander noted the work being done by the Ministry of Housing and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development to address the needs of the returnees and announced that Geneva will be sending out an appeal for international support.

¶12. The Ambassador congratulated the GOA for mobilizing to deal with the recent wave of returns and welcomed the announcement the UN would be making an appeal for multinational support. He said the U.S. would be prepared to response to such an appeal.

¶13. Other Ambassadors expressed their support. The French Ambassador volunteered that he would be reporting immediately ForMin Kouchner, whom he indicated is a close friend of Karzai. Saudi Arabia was optimistic about providing assistance, as was Canada, especially for Kanadahar. The Chinese would check with Beijing. Others present were Norway, Japan, and Spain, as well as UNHCR and IOM.

Comment

¶14. The GOA will need to work closely with UNHCR and IOM to develop and implement a comprehensive reintegration plan that can deal both with the recent influx of returns from Iran as well as the long-anticipated returns from Pakistan. Given the political beating the Ministry of Refugees has received over its failure to prevent the Iranian deportations, the GOA is clearly trying to take a more proactive approach to the issue. As made clear in the meeting with ambassadors, this includes appeals for

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increased international assistance.
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